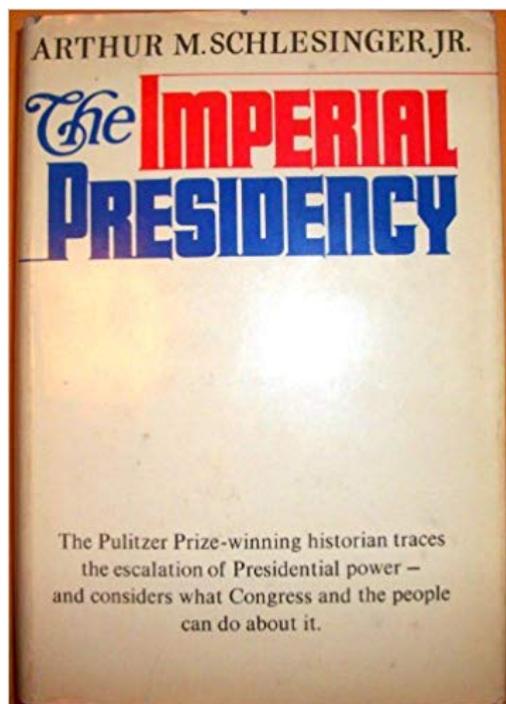


The Imperial Presidency *by* Arthur Meier Schlesinger



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The Pulitzer Prize-winning historian traces the escalation of Presidential power- and considers what Congress and the people can do about it



Reviews of the *The Imperial Presidency* *by* Arthur Meier Schlesinger

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Note: The Imperial Presidency was published in 1973, not long before President Nixon resigned over the Watergate scandal. The author subsequently revisited the theme several times, as attested to by the epilogue (1989) and first introduction (2004) in this edition.

As Schlesinger sees it, there is bound to be some jockeying for power under the US Constitution, which provides for a separation of powers between the three branches of government. Given the president's ability to act quickly and decisively, the pendulum generally swings in favor of the Executive Branch when it comes to military matters or international relations. Congress may play a

more prominent role in the domestic arena.

Numerous illustrations are presented of how the roles of Congress and the president have fluctuated since 1789. Many issues between the branches that we tend to view as of recent vintage have come up before - truly, as the saying goes, "there is nothing new under the sun."

The powers of the presidency greatly expanded during the Great Depression and World War II, due in part to the challenges faced by the nation and in part to FDR's personality.

After WWII, the pendulum did not swing back to more congressional control as it had after previous wars; the US was now a world power engaged in a Cold War with the USSR. Truman and Johnson tended to exercise their powers aggressively in the international arena and resist compromises with political opponents. Eisenhower was no fan of big government, but he was fond of keeping secrets. Kennedy (in whose White House Schlesinger served) was open-minded and straightforward, a real straight shooter. Leaving aside differences in style and substance of the individual presidents, the power of the presidency was generally on the rise.

One sign was steady growth in the White House staff, no longer the "eyes and ears of the president" so much as decision-makers in their own right who were able to function without being subject to congressional oversight. And two good-sized wars (Korea, Vietnam et al.) were waged without being declared by Congress.

The "Imperial Presidency" reached its zenith under Nixon, who evidently thought the president, once elected, could set and execute national policies without seeking approval from Congress or anyone else. It was as though Nixon had concluded, Schlesinger suggests, that the separation of powers provided for in the Constitution was outmoded and should be quietly scrapped. Whatever the merits of such a view, it was never shared with the American people - who might not have agreed. Moreover, Nixon's behavior reflected his glaring personality flaws.

Congress and others pushed back, Nixon was ousted, and life went on. It would be "many, many years," Schlesinger wrote in 1973, "before another White House staff would dare take the liberties with the Constitution and the laws the Nixon White House had taken." Schlesinger continued to support a strong presidency within the constitutional framework, however, on grounds that Congress is better suited to react to the president's recommendations than to play the lead role itself.

Between the 1973 book and the 1989 epilogue, Schlesinger rejects a series of ideas for changing the system - parliamentary system, single six-year term of office for presidents, balanced budget amendment, line item veto, scrapping the electoral college, etc. He seems more open (perhaps reflecting his political views) to repealing the 22nd Amendment (2-term limit for presidents) and authorizing presidents to vary tax rates or engage in stimulus spending as economic circumstances may require.

In the 2004 introduction, at the age of 87, Schlesinger laments that "once again, international crisis [starting with 9/11] has resurrected the Imperial Presidency." Witness the Patriot Act - wars in Afghanistan and Iraq - activities of Attorney General John Ashcroft - alleged domestic spying - Gitmo - Abu Ghraib - the most secretive administration since Nixon. He concludes with a prediction: "the Imperial Presidency redux is likely to continue messing things up" for a while, but "democracy's singular virtue - its capacity for self-correction - will one day swing into action."

Students of American history should enjoy this book. It is well written and seems ably researched.

The point is well taken that no set of rules will solve every problem likely to come up so political leaders must be held accountable for acting reasonably.

The issue of presidential overreaching remains a live concern. If Schlesinger were still alive (he passed in 2007), it would be interesting to know what he would make of some of the current president's actions.

On the other hand, the conclusion that the country can keep rocking along with the present system is dissatisfying. And by focusing so intently on presidential power, Schlesinger, tends to overlook other dangerous trends - such as the seemingly inexorable growth of a national welfare state and federal bureaucracies - which may prove far harder to fight.

Wen

The year before George W. Bush took office as president I attended a professional conference where a graduate student offered a paper that posed the question whether Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s "Imperial Presidency" was still valid. Quite a debate ensued. Today, in the wake of the Bush Doctrine of preemptive war, and its application in Iraq, I am compelled to offer that this revised volume, with new introduction, answers the previous question with a resounding yea. This has been a very important volume in the study of the presidency, especially regarding the constitution, foreign policy, and war. In the shadow of the Iraqi affair, I would go one step further and say it is a vital work in these troubled times. No, the era of the Imperial Presidency never really went away; and yes, it is a vital concern for the future of the republic and global stability. Schlesinger has recognized this and once again warns us of pending dangers.

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Although this book was dated when I read it and is probably now considered a history book, I found it very enlightening and informative. I think perhaps the author tends to protect Kennedy and Roosevelt(II) but it is still a very good book. It reads very easily and has that Schlesinger signature. I would highly recommend the book to anyone interested in presidential history.

Cordaron

Excellent book

Vudomuro

Brings a detailed historical perspective to an overused political term.

Meztihn

Good book and good service.

Tyler Is Not Here

Does history repeat itself? Sure seems like it. Scary stuff.

This was a superbly written and equally informative book

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